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ABSTRACT

There are four central issues in mobilizing the resources of American universities to contribute more effectively to alleviating world hunger and malnutrition: (1) To what extent should universities' motivation be original, and to what extent related to government support?; (2) What needs to be done, beyond additional food production?; (3) What can the universities do?; and (4) How can the Federal government be most helpful to the institutions in meeting their objectives? (MSE)

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Mobilizing University Resources Against Hunger and Malnutrition

by David E. Bell

A Ford Foundation Report

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I have been asked to talk in a very brief time about a very large subject—mobilizing the resources of U.S. universities to contribute more effectively to the alleviation of world hunger and malnutrition. Needless to say, I will not try to cover the subject thoroughly, but instead will focus on what seems to me four central issues.

The first concerns motivation and interest. Most of us assume that it is clearly appropriate and desirable for the United States to help relieve hunger and malnutrition in the world. But the assumption should not go unexamined. There are important questions here, relating to the international interests of our country and of various groups within it, to the sometimes conflicting demands of humanitarian and commercial values, to the always heated arguments over the allocation of federal and state tax dollars. For example, how far should federal funds be used, through the Agency for International Development, to help raise agricultural production in developing countries—perhaps to the detriment of U.S. agricultural exports? How far should state funds be used, through state universities, to support professors doing research on problems of tropical agriculture, or to support graduate students from developing countries?

These are fair questions and deserve honest answers. My own, briefly are as follows:

The United States clearly can and should help with emergency needs for food. With the world's population still shooting upward, and food supplies precariously keeping pace but subject to the hazards of weather and other variables, serious emergencies could arise any year, as they have recently in Bangladesh, the Sahel, and other places. Such emergencies raise important

questions about how to make relief activities more efficient, and how to share costs fairly. But surely the case is unassailable that the United States should contribute generously when emergencies occur.

The larger and more difficult questions relate to U.S. help in expanding food production in developing countries. It is certainly true that Thai rice producers or Pakistani wheat producers may turn out to be tough competitors for American farmer-exporters, just as Brazilian soybean producers have been in recent years. Why should the U.S. taxpayer support the expansion of such competition?

There are three classic reasons:

Humanitarian: Because of the enormous growth of population in developing countries, there is no way to meet the growing demand for food except to produce most of it there. Neither the productive nor the financial capacity of advanced countries could be expected to meet that demand.

Economic: U.S. support for economic growth and development in other countries pays off. The huge U.S. farm exports today are a direct result of successful U.S. foreign aid programs to Europe and Japan after World War II. The evidence of recent years suggests that strengthening the economies of developing countries will also result in larger export markets for U.S. farm products. There will certainly be difficulties of adjustment, but the argument seems strong that with world markets growing as a result of larger populations and higher incomes for at least the rest of the century, our highly competitive agricultural producers have much to gain and little to lose from U.S. help to the developing countries.

Political: The United States is part of an increasingly interdependent world society, one that faces extraordinary risks as the capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons spreads to country after country. A successful international political system in the next few decades is inconceivable except in terms of cooperation among nations in meeting major world problems—among the most important of which are nuclear weapons, the population explosion, the pollution

of air and oceans, and world hunger and malnutrition. If Americans fail to join others in trying to meet these problems, we will miss tremendous opportunities to shape our own future in desirable ways.

These arguments, I believe, are powerful and persuasive. They amply support U.S. assistance in meeting problems of world hunger and malnutrition. This reasoning has been accepted by the Congress as the basis for U.S. foreign assistance—although never without controversy—in all the years since World War II.

These arguments have become stronger, not weaker, in recent years with America's growing international involvement. And I suggest it is time we changed some of our traditional attitudes toward international agricultural issues. One is that of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which in recent years has been almost exclusively concerned with the commercial interests of American farmers, leaving the broader interests of the United States in world food and nutrition problems to be represented by AID and the Department of State. Surely this is a narrow and obsolete view. The Department of Agriculture should reflect the wide range of U.S. interests relative to international agricultural policies—the interests of U.S. producers certainly, but also the interest of American consumers and the general interest of all U.S. citizens in a world in which hunger and malnutrition are declining.

Another set of traditional attitudes that are ripe for change belong to state governments, which have thought it generally not appropriate to finance international projects, except for trade promotion. Surely in the circumstances of a state like Minnesota—where a large share of the agricultural markets is overseas—it would be sensible to contribute modestly, for example, through its universities, to the improvement of the world economy on which the state's future depends.

What Can Be Done? A second central issue is to identify correctly what is needed to alleviate world hunger and malnutrition. To produce more food is one requirement, but that is plainly not

enough. Any careful look at the situation will reveal multiple causes for hunger and malnutrition. For convenience, I will group them under four headings cited in a recent study by the National Academy of Sciences.

The first cause of hunger and malnutrition in the world is, of course, the growth of population and national income since World War II. The figures are familiar and I will not labor them. World population is now four billion and although rates of growth are beginning to ease slightly, further increases in the total are inevitable—probably to nearly six billion by the end of the century and to eight to eleven billion by the time zero population growth could be reached sometime in the twenty-first century. The great bulk of the increases has been and will continue to be in the low-income countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Even slow rates of growth in income per capita will result in very large increases in demand for food in these regions. At the same time, rising affluence in the high income countries will also increase demand for food and agricultural imports, particularly in Europe and Japan.

To meet these demands will require an unprecedented increase in food production in the developing countries for at least the next two decades. The NAS study suggests that these countries (excluding China) must increase food production by about 3 to 4 per cent per year to the end of the century. By contrast, from 1950 to 1975 production in those countries grew by about 2.8 per cent per year. That in itself was an extraordinarily high rate of growth, and to improve on it will be difficult indeed, especially since land and water resources are becoming scarcer and more costly. In addition, there will need to be continued expansion of food production and trade by the more developed countries.

More food production is not the only answer needed for hunger and malnutrition. It is also important to reduce the instability of supplies and prices to the most vulnerable customers. This instability has in recent years reflected more than the ups and downs of production. It has resulted

also from inadequate worldwide arrangements from stockpiling supplies and releasing them where and when needed. We must develop international and national policies and programs capable of dealing sensibly with production instability and of protecting the most disadvantaged countries and consumers from the swings of supplies and prices.

But the list does not stop there. In any country the poor—those who can neither produce nor buy the food they need—make up the bulk of the hungry. Consequently, any serious attack on world hunger and malnutrition must include an attack on poverty. In developing countries this means a concern for the rural poor—landless laborers who need land or jobs, low-income farmers who need credit, information, supplies—and for the urban poor—low-income workers who need jobs, small-scale entrepreneurs who need credit, information, supplies. All the poor, whether from city or countryside, need various types of organizations to pool their limited resources and gain some degree of economic and political power.

These requirements for dealing with poverty—and therefore with hunger and malnutrition—have become clearer in recent years as we have learned more about the development process. But to meet them will be extremely difficult, since in the normal case strongly entrenched interests will oppose needed changes.

A fourth set of requirements has to do with nutrition. To me, the biggest element of surprise connected with the NAS study was how little the world has learned about nutrition. There are certainly serious nutritional deficiencies in advanced countries like the U.S. as well as in low-income countries like India or Bangladesh. We know little about how to establish better nutritional policies and make them effective in either kind of country. We know a fair amount about individual nutritional factors like some vitamins and iron, but we have little knowledge about the relations between diets and health, or about how to educate or otherwise influence people in their handling and use of food.

The importance of achieving a better understanding of policies that result in high levels of nutrition and health, even though they may not have been consciously designed for that purpose, is shown by comparative data. For example, Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala, with average per capita income of less than $150, have achieved standards of life expectancy and infant mortality far better than those of many countries with higher per capita incomes.

Summing up this issue, I am suggesting that a serious concern with world hunger and malnutrition requires attention to the rapid expansion of food production, to ameliorating the instability of food supplies, to the reduction of poverty, and to policies and programs affecting nutrition.

The University Connection. The third major issue is: what can U.S. universities contribute to these objectives? Clearly a great many actions are required, by governments and by private individuals and groups in many countries. Among them, U.S. universities may seem limited in resources and distant from the scene of action. But my own view is that they could help a good deal through the things they traditionally do best—teaching, research, and (for some universities at least) service.

In most parts of the developing world there has been no explosion in undergraduate enrollments, but there are as yet few first-quality postgraduate programs; even where Ph.D. programs have begun to emerge they are fragile. Many of the ablest young graduates from the developing countries would benefit greatly from postgraduate and postdoctoral experience at high-quality U.S. institutions. For the next decade or two, therefore, U.S. universities have a great opportunity to train these young people for work in universities, research institutions, and other positions of intellectual leadership in their own countries. The opportunities to select the most promising young people for such training have never been better, and the opportunities for them to make full use of their training at home are steadily rising.

U.S. universities plainly have some deficiencies to overcome before they can respond to these opportunities. Few have made any serious effort to think about possible changes in postgraduate curricula or in the dissertation process that might result in better training for the youth of developing countries. Few universities have seriously tried to build and sustain a thorough knowledge of other parts of the world, so that foreign graduate students can receive informed teaching and guidance. And in some subjects badly needed by students from developing countries—especially inter-disciplinary ones like nutrition—U.S. graduate teaching for the most part needs updating and modernizing even for the purposes of U.S. students, let alone for those from abroad.

So there is much to be done to improve U.S. universities as centers of postgraduate teaching related to world hunger and malnutrition. Title XII* should provide helpful assistance, but the universities themselves will have to take major initiatives if much progress is to be made.

There is another aspect of teaching to which U.S. universities could contribute, and that is to help establish teaching institutions in developing countries. The past record in this respect is a mixed one, and for every example of comparative success such as Los Baños in the Philippines or Viçosa in Brazil there are several that have been less successful. Title XII provides the opportunity for a fresh start in this difficult and challenging field, and I hope the opportunity will be accepted. But to do the job right will require a much more sophisticated view of what is needed and how to achieve it than most of us had in the past. We have all learned through painful and expensive experience that the U.S. land-grant university grew out of the U.S. historical background to fit

*A part of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1975. "This title instructed the Agency for International Development to undertake significant new initiatives toward achieving the goal of Famine Prevention and Freedom from Hunger. The core concept of Title XII is the fuller and more effective involvement of the Land Grant, Sea Grant and other qualified universities and of the technical resources of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and of other Federal Agencies having relevant capabilities." (From the report to the Congress on Title XII of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 as amended, April 1, 1977.)

American social, political, and economic circumstances. It cannot be transplanted to other environments without major adaptation and evolution. Nor can the U.S. extension service, as I have been recently reminded by colleagues. They note that no project to date concerned with improving extension services in developing countries has successfully responded to the simple fact that in many such countries women, not men, do much of the field work in agriculture. After twenty-five years of technical assistance in agriculture the observation is strong testimony to the difficulty of getting outside one's own cultural conditioning. (To avoid misunderstanding, I should add that the observation applies to the Ford Foundation as much as to any other U.S. organization engaged in technical assistance.)

In any fresh effort to help build teaching institutions in developing countries, therefore, I hope the accent will be on experimentation to develop appropriate new systems, not on the transfer of American models no matter how successful they may be in the United States.

With respect to research by U.S. universities on world hunger and malnutrition, I would offer two main comments.

First, much of the research can be done in the United States. This is true especially of fundamental research—on biological nitrogen fixation, for example, or photosynthesis. Much of this kind of research is of course as necessary to increase agricultural production in the United States as in developing countries, and financial support for it can and should come from regular federal and state budgets, not from AID.

Second, other research can best be done—some of it can only be done—in the developing countries. This is true especially of applied research, on plant breeding, for example, or nutritional problems in different local settings, or the comparative economic benefits of alternative cropping patterns. Support for applied research, and for the building of research capacity in developing countries, is provided by AID (under Title XII and other laws). But much of it might also be funded by the USDA and other federal agen-

cies because of the potential value to the United States of knowledge gained from research abroad. To cite only one example, research conducted at the International Wheat and Maize Improvement Center in Mexico has already resulted in substantial benefits for wheat and corn farmers in the United States. The American scientific community—and American producers and consumers—can only benefit from participating more vigorously in international research efforts that will inevitably become more effective and more fruitful in the years to come. But such participation will require more initiative among American university researchers and a greater willingness to seek out international involvements and collaborators than they have shown in the past.

With respect to service activities abroad by U.S. universities, I would think even more change and innovation are needed, compared to past efforts, than in the case of teaching and research. On the one hand, it is evident that a great many important things need to be done, to which U.S. universities might contribute, such as to help design and build institutions in developing countries for teaching, for research, for extension, for credit, for rural development, and many other purposes. Title XII provides a framework for supporting such activities.

On the other hand, everyone concerned needs to recognize that conditions have changed greatly since the first wave of university technical assistance projects twenty years ago. There are in developing countries today—as there were not twenty years ago—thousands of university faculty members and government officials, with good training and considerable experience. With few exceptions they would welcome professional collaboration from people they respect. But they would resent and refuse any suggestion that American professors want to come to their countries to tell them how to do their jobs. They are even more aware than we are that technical solutions developed for the United States will not work in other countries by simple transfer but, if at all, only after substantial adaptation requiring

extensive research and experimentation. Hence they welcome research collaboration, help with methodology, and other cooperative efforts in which we join them as colleagues seeking to find successful technologies and to create institutions to fit conditions in their countries.

In summary, I believe U.S. universities have a great deal to contribute to the alleviation of world hunger and malnutrition if they approach the problems in a spirit of research, experimentation, innovation, and cooperation with professional colleagues abroad.

The Federal Government's Role. The fourth, and last, of the central issues is: how can the U.S. Government be most helpful to U.S. universities in addressing problems of world hunger and malnutrition?

Since this conference focuses on AID and on Title XII, I'll begin there. In my opinion, Title XII permits two extremely important advances over past practice. The first is to allow for longer-term involvements by U.S. universities. The various kinds of activities I have just discussed—in teaching, research, and service—require sustained, continuing effort over a period of years, because they are inherently difficult and time-consuming and because they must be conducted across barriers of distance, language, and culture. Such activities cannot be conducted effectively on two- or three-year time tables. The NAS study suggests that the norm for planning and commitment should be a five-year period, regularly reviewed and renewed. Only under some such arrangement providing reasonable continuity of funding can one hope to obtain first-quality professional talent and cumulative results.

It should be noted in passing that a longer-term commitment should not mean any relaxation in standards. Quite the contrary: experience has amply demonstrated that the successful conduct of teaching, research, and service activities in developing countries is extraordinarily demanding. It is much harder than conducting the same kinds of activities in the United States. Under Title

XII, therefore, as under any other AID activities, standards of periodic review and evaluation should be high and rigorous.

The second major advance permitted by Title XII as compared with recent practice is to allow for relations between the U.S. universities and countries that are no longer receiving concessional economic aid from the U.S. Government—the so-called "middle-income" countries. It is appropriate of course that AID's economic assistance on concessional terms should be concentrated on the world's poorest countries. But scientific collaboration, especially in research and training, can be highly fruitful with "middle-income" developing countries such as Brazil and Mexico, and Title XII fortunately permits such relations.

In addition to these two major innovations, Title XII encourages a fresh look at the whole range of AID-university relations. I would hope both AID and the universities will take advantage of this opportunity to break out of past rigidities and to think anew. AID, for example, needs a vigorous recruitment and training drive to replenish its professional staff, which has been depleted by retirements and other departures. It also needs a series of changes to simplify its procedures and to offer strong incentives for high-quality, long-term university commitments. The universities, in turn, need to understand that Title XII is not a convenient way to obtain more funds for what they would be doing anyway, but an opportunity—if they wish to seize it—to make major commitments, on a sustained basis, to international research, teaching, and service. Title XII cannot work unless the universities are prepared to invest a goodly share of their own time and talent in these efforts. The partnership between AID and the universities that Title XII calls for is, therefore, a demanding one on both sides. But I would also point out that the effective use of Title XII can result in enormous gains to many millions of the world's people.

Before closing, I would like to make two brief comments on matters that are beyond the direct scope of this conference.

The first is that other agencies of the U.S. Government besides AID must be involved in an assault on world hunger and malnutrition. One of the key recommendations of the NAS study, for example, is a major enlargement and re-shaping of research support by the Department of Agriculture. The objectives of such a shift would be several: to put greater emphasis on fundamental research; to introduce into the USDA system a greater reliance on competitive grants; to place on the USDA a major new responsibility for research on nutrition, and to built into USDA a strong and continuing interest in international research on food and nutrition. This is only one illustration of many changes in U.S. Government policies and programs that will be needed if the United States is to make a stronger contribution to alleviating world hunger.

The second comment is to ask whether Title XII should be broadened. I have personally encountered situations in developing countries in the fields of health and family planning, and of education, in which it would appear that the ideas expressed in Title XII would be highly relevant. U.S. universities have capacities that might contribute to the solution of other major problems in the developing countries in addition to hunger and malnutrition. Might it be that Title XII, if it works well, should be broadened to address education, health, population and other problems?

But surely the first step is to use well what is now available. This conference is concerned with how to make Title XII work as it stands. You have a great deal to discuss and I wish you success in your deliberations.